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FOTM 2020

- > [Fragment of the Month: December 2020](#)
- > [Fragment of the Month: November 2020](#)
- > [Fragment of the Month: October 2020](#)
- > [Fragment of the Month: September 2020](#)
- > [Fragment of the Month: August 2020](#)
- > [Fragment of the Month: July 2020](#)
- > [Fragment of the Month: June 2020](#)
- > [Fragment of the Month: May 2020](#)
- > [Fragment of the Month: April 2020](#)
- > [Fragment of the Month: March 2020](#)
- > [Fragment of the Month: February 2020](#)
- > [Fragment of the Month: January 2020](#)

FOTM 2021

FOTM 2019

FOTM 2018

FOTM 2017

Fragment of the Month: December 2016

Fragment of the Month: November 2016

Fragment of the Month: October 2016

Fragment of the Month: September 2016

Fragment of the Month: August 2016

Fragment of the Month: June 2016

Fragment of the Month: May 2016

Fragment of the Month: April 2016

Fragment of the Month: January 2016

Fragment of the Month: September 2015

Fragment of the Month: August 2015

Fragment of the Month: June 2015

Fragment of the Month: April 2015

Fragment of the Month: March 2015

Fragment of the Month: February 2015

Fragment of the Month: January 2015

Fragment of the Month: December 2014

Fragment of the Month: November 2014

Fragment of the Month: October 2014

Fragment of the Month: September 2014

Fragment of the Month: May 2014

Addendum to November 2011's Fragment of the Month

FRAGMENT OF THE MONTH ARCHIVE

Fragment of the Month: December 2020

A Memorial list of Elijah b. Zechariah's family: T-S 10J18.2

Amir Ashur

Elijah b. Zechariah was a prominent and important figure in the first three decades of the 13th century. He served as a judge in Abraham Maimuni's court, and his sons were also active in the community.¹ His first appearance in the genizah as an active figure can be found in 1204, in Alexandria,² and he was still active at 1241, when his last signed document is found.³

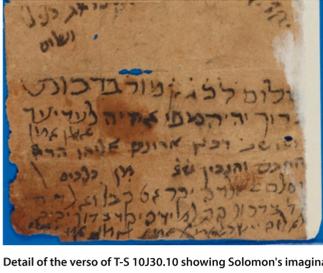
But what was his origin? In his book *Education*, Goitein mentions that Elijah was from an Eretz-Yisraeli family, but without any evidence to support it (Goitein 1962: 84). The same statement can be found in his *A Mediterranean Society*: 'He originated from Palestine, but had been living for such a long time in Alexandria that he was regularly called "the Alexandrian"' (Goitein 1967-93: i 64). Goitein repeats this claim in vol. III, n.15: 'The family of the writer of this letter, Solomon b. Elijah, originated in Palestine' (Goitein 1967-93: iii 426 n. 15).

So, from what source did Goitein draw his conclusion about the Palestinian origin of the family? In a letter sent to Elijah, his son, Solomon, complains that he 'still had to register at the poll-tax office for Palestinians'.⁴ More direct evidence can be found in a letter sent to Elijah by another son of his, Abū Zikrī, an army doctor: he implies that his father had good prospects of becoming the Jewish chief justice of Alexandria, although a certain prominent man (either the Muslim governor or a Jewish notable) 'does not like Palestinians'.⁵

Mordechai Akiva Friedman has found another hint to Elijah's Palestinian origin, in a further letter sent to him. In this letter the sender writes poetically 'His day of exile should be like a fleeting shadow' suggesting he had immigrated to Egypt from the Land of Israel.⁶

In this short FOTM I would like to bring more direct evidence of his Palestinian origins – a memorial list of his family, written and signed by Berakhot, none other than his son Solomon,⁷ whose by-name (*kunya*) was Abū I-Barakāt, which was sometime shortened to the Arabic Barakāt and the Hebrew Berākhot, as found here.⁸

The recto of this fragment was published and discussed by Goitein and others,⁹ but no one has discussed the verso, probably because it looks like a random pen trial in a very messy hand. The young Solomon used to doodle such pen trials, in which he praised himself: for example, T-S 10J30.10, where he used the empty space above and below the address in a letter sent to his father to write a 'somewhat pompous writing exercise';¹⁰ in the same messy hand as that used here. As Prof. M.A. Friedman suggested (in a personal communication), the letter on the verso of which this list was written was probably addressed to his father Elijah as well.

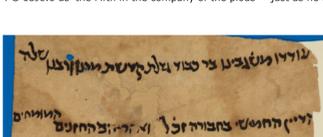


Detail of the verso of T-S 10J30.10 showing Solomon's imaginative writing practice

From this list we can sketch Elijah's family tree as follows:

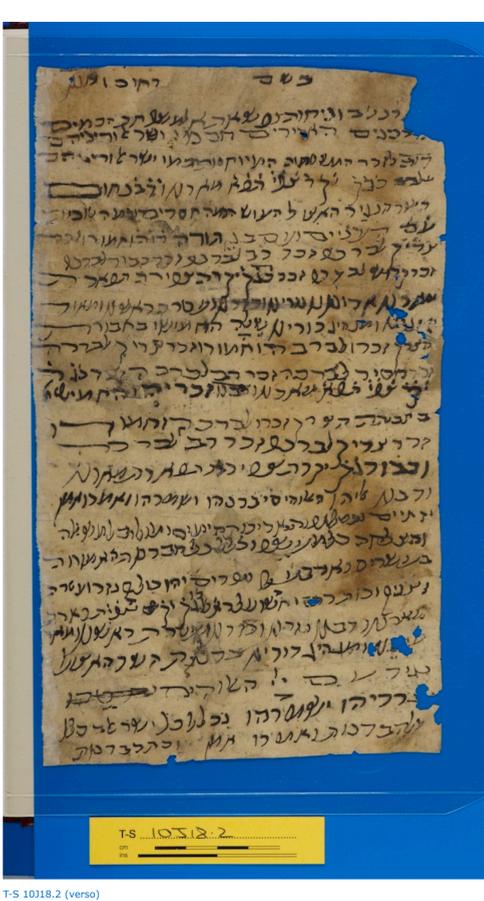


Since at the end of this list Berakhot refers to himself grandiloquently with such titles as Nagid and leader of the generation – 'the Diadem and the Crown, the coronet of our head, and the light of our eyes, and the leader of our generation, Berakhot the noble prince, the Nagid of the People of YHWH' (see below, lines 23-25) – one might question the veracity of the other details in this 'somewhat pompous writing exercise'. Nevertheless, there is reason to believe that the names of his ancestors and their titles are authentic. This Shelah is attested in T-S 13J6.6 as 'the Fifth in the company of the pious' – just as he mentioned here.¹¹



Detail of T-S 13J6.6 recto showing Shelah to be the 'Fifth in the company of the pious'

As Goitein noted in his card index (reel 4, card 100641), the name of his son is missing, but now we know that his name was Zechariah, Elijah's father. We have a letter from Shelah, when he was the 'Sixth', which was written around 1085, in a beautiful Hebrew, probably from Tyre.¹² So we now know the place of origin of the family. Unfortunately, I could not find any trace in the Genizah of Elijah's great-grandfather Nahum, but I hope his name will pop up sometime in the future.



T-S 10J18.2 (verso)

השם	רוחם וחסונם [13]	1
וד בט נוחות נפשאל למשפת התמים		2
[ה]בנים האדירים תמי ישראל ודיניהם		3
רתי זכר המשפחת המיוחסות חמי ישראל ודיניהם		4
עליבם נלם יקר צפירתם אלה מארנו [14] וזו חומו		5
השר הנגיד האציל העושה מהם חסידים ומהם טובות		6
עם הגנים ועם בנ[?] תורה וית ותמוחו זכר		7
צדיק לברכה זכר בר לברכה זכר כבוד לברכה		8
זכר קדוש לברכה זכר עלן קירת צפירת תפארת		9
מארנו ארזנו וזרנו וכרנו [15] ועטרת ראשנו ומאר		10
ענינו ומגיד דורנו שקלו העמישי בהבורת		11
הצדק זכר לברכה ומחמד זכר צדיק לברכה		12
זכר חסיד לברכה זכר בר לברכה זכר עלן		13
יקר עלן תפלה מארנו רובנו זכרתי העמישי		14
בהבורת הצדק זכר לברכה ותמוחו		15
זכר צדיק לברכה זכר בר לברכה		16
וכבוד עלן קירת צפירת תפארת מארנו		17
ורבנו אליו האלוהים ברכנו ששמרו ומארנו אמן		18
יקתי [16] (!) והשלום (?) והאריכות (!) הימים ופוליו כל משאלה		19
והצלת כל מושעת וכלו כל הברכות האמורות		20
בשערם וארבעה ספרים היו כלם נודו ונערה		21
ונצין ומותרת ידשו על ראשם יקן יק צפי תפארת		22
מארנו ורבנו נורנו [ה]רנו ועטרת ראשנו ומאר		23
ענינו [ה]מנהג דורנו ברכות השר האציל		24
נגיד עם האלוהים שישא [17]		25
[י]ברכה ששמרו וכלו כל ישראל בכלל		26
לברכות ומארנו אמן וכתב ברכות		27

Translation

- 1 In the name of the Merciful and Compassionate
- 2 For the good memory and rest of the souls of the family of scholars
- 3 the illustrious Rabbis, the scholars of Israel and their Judges
- 4 For the good memory of the distinguished families of the scholars of Israel and their judges
- 5 of our Rabbi, his honor, the great and holy, the distinguished, esteemed crown of glory, our master Nahum
- 6 the Prince, the Nagid, the Noble, the great benefactor of
- 7 the poor and the scholars¹⁸ may the spirit of the Lord give him rest! And his son,
- 8 may the memory of the pious be for a blessing! May the memory of his honor be for a blessing!
- 9 May the memory of the holy be for a blessing! May the memory of his honor, great and holy, the distinguished, esteemed crown of glory
- 10 our Nagid, our master, the Diadem and the Crown, the coronet of our head, the light
- 11 of our eyes and the leader of our generation Shelah, the Fifth in
- 12 the company of the pious, may his memory be blessed, and his son, may the memory of the pious be for a blessing!
- 13 May the memory of the righteous be for a blessing! May the memory of the Rav be for a blessing! May the memory of his honor, the great and holy
- 14 the distinguished, esteemed crown of glory, our master and Rabbi Zechariah the Fifth
- 15 in the company of the pious, may his memory be blessed, and his son,
- 16 may the memory of the pious be for a blessing! May the memory of the Rav be for a blessing!
- 17 And his honor, the great and holy, the distinguished, esteemed crown of glory, our master and
- 18 Rabbi Elijah, may God bless and protect him, Amen
- 19 May wellbeing and long life be established, and fulfillment of every wish
- 20 and success in every action and all the blessings found
- 21 in Twenty-Four books¹⁹ may all of them serve as diadem and crown
- 22 and a turban and a capital, that will be renewed on the head of his honor, the great and holy, the distinguished
- 23 our master and Rabbi, the Diadem and the Crown, the coronet of our head, and the light
- 24 of our eyes, and the leader of our generation, Berakhot²⁰ the noble prince
- 25 The Nagid of the People of YHWH, may the lord cover him²¹
- 26 bless him, protect him. Let us surround all Israel with all
- 27 the blessings. And say Amen. So write Berakhot.

I wish to thank Prof. M.A. Friedman for his helpful comments

Footnotes

- 1 Elijah and his family are the subject of a PhD dissertation by Motzkin from 1965.
- 2 T-S 16.126.
- 3 T-S 12.620, Motzkin (1965), 13.
- 4 T-S 12.174, see Goitein (1967-93: I 406 n. 29): *al-Jāliya ʿi-shāmiyya*, the poll-tax office for Syro-Palestinians.
- 5 Goitein (1967-93: I 64), T-S NS J 29, now edited in *Frenkel & Friedlan* (2006), 603-607; for discussion see Friedman (2017a), 219-220 and n. 151.
- 6 T-S Misc. 25.9, verso ll. 9-10: *והנחמנו כל ימינו*, ed. Friedman (2017), 370.
- 7 As suggested by Prof. M.A. Friedman.
- 8 Friedman (2014), 333.
- 9 See the bibliography on <https://fjg.genizah.org>.
- 10 Friedman (2014), 333-334.
- 11 That is, the Fifth in the Palestinian Yeshiva. On this title see Gil (1992), 505-507.
- 12 T-S 12.106, published by Gil (1983), no. 550.
- 13 Some remains of letters are seen above this word.
- 14 The spelling *מארנו* can be found in other genizah documents.
- 15 The reading of the last two words in uncertain.
- 16 A misspelling for *תקיים*.
- 17 *יטירתו* an error for *יטירתו*.
- 18 For this title see Goitein & Friedman 2008: 765.
- 19 = The Bible.
- 20 From lible 19, Solomon is praising himself, with self-important words and titles that clearly do not rightfully belong to him.
- 21 Should be: 'crown him'.

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